
Jewish Service-Learning Partnerships Between Hillel and the Public University

A Case Study

Jody Myers

Professor, California State University, Northridge

Renée Cohen Goodwin

Chief Operating Officer of the Stroum Jewish Community Center, Seattle

This article examines the multiple advantages of and constraints on Jewish service-learning when it occurs in partnership with a public university. Using data from five successive years of New Orleans-based program organized by the Hillel Student Center at California State University, Northridge, we describe and evaluate the variations in the partnership with campus groups and academic units in these five trips. Our research shows that such partnerships enhance the viability of the activity and enable unique benefits for the enhancement of Jewish identity and Torah learning that may not occur in similar but solely Jewish programs. They also provide training in interfaith and religious-secular dialogue. Collaboration with university staff and faculty fostered the intellectual growth and thoughtful reflection that ought to be central to Jewish service-learning.

This article examines how the service-learning program of a Jewish organization is shaped when it partners with university departments or with non-Jewish university-affiliated student groups. Using data from five successive years of service-learning Alternative Spring Break (ASB) programs initiated by California State University, Northridge Hillel, we describe several types of partnerships and the benefits and drawbacks of each. We show how such partnering may be the optimal way to teach the universalistic value of *tikkun olam* and prepare students for effective civic engagement after college. Our experience can instruct others how to carefully define staff responsibilities and pay vigilant attention to program content.

We argue that service-learning in a distant and unregulated work setting is enhanced by the greater accountability and structure that come with a university's disciplinary codes, commitment to religious tolerance, and standards of learning. The ensuing learning and fellowship differ from that available in stand-alone Hillel programs, but do not undermine particularistic Jewish goals. Indeed, we learned that, particularly when partnering with a Religious Studies Department, Jewish students have a greater opportunity and need to define their

Jody Myers is a professor of Religious Studies and the Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Interdisciplinary Program at California State University, Northridge. Her research specialization is in modern Jewish thought and religious life.

Renée Cohen Goodwin is the Chief Operating Officer of the Stroum Jewish Community Center in Seattle. Prior to this appointment in November 2011, Renée spent 12 years working for Hillel, the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, the past 7 as the Executive Director of Hillel at California State University, Northridge.

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Jewish identity in the presence of non-Jewish participants than in the regular Hillel programs. Because Hillel initiated and took the major responsibility for the service-learning experiences, its concerns and values are highlighted in this article. However, university departments and university-affiliated groups might also learn how such partnerships may help achieve their own institutional goals.

Days after Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, a group of California State University (CSUN) Hillel students approached then-director Renée Cohen for help organizing a volunteer student relief effort in New Orleans. After hearing from a southern colleague about the uncoordinated mass of volunteers on the scene, she channeled the students' enthusiasm into planning an ASB trip that would be as worthwhile for the New Orleans residents as for the students. Together they articulated their objectives. Students easily identified the Jewish values of *tzedakah* (justice) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) that were driving their desire to help. The staff pointed out that group study of Torah texts would reinforce the service work, and because Pesach would fall during spring break, holiday observance would be integrated into the program. All felt that student service in New Orleans would put Jewish values, text learning, and Jewish ritual into a real-life context.

BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

From the outset, staff and students agreed that this service-learning program should be designed as a partnership with other campus student groups. The staff thought that developing a program that included students from the university at large would fulfill a number of Jewish and campus-wide objectives. It was thought that the best way to inculcate the Jewish—though universally focused—value of *tikkun olam* would be through a program in which non-Jewish students participated as well. Such a program would provide an opportunity for students to explore their identities, beliefs, and core values. The experience of immersion in a challenging environment is particularly effective in enhancing personal growth (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). The discomfort that would undoubtedly result from spending six days in devastated Louisiana and the challenges of planning with and working alongside non-Jewish students would create the opportunity for self-reflection, maturation, and practice in dealing with others. Further, the staff considered that a partnership might build connections among students. CSUN has been a peaceful environment, lacking student discord even on controversial topics. Nevertheless, creating a sense of community is difficult on this commuter campus with a working student population. The latest national Hillel strategic-planning initiative identifies partnerships as a key strategy to reach unaffiliated Jewish students (Hillel's Strategic Plan, 2006, p. 13), and the staff felt that the construction of an exciting and idealistic program would draw in Jewish students who do not usually attend Hillel events. At the same time, the staff knew that a mixed group would make it harder for Hillel to provide for Jewish students' particular Jewish needs. Further, it would make it more challenging to raise funds, because some Jewish donors would either look askance at the commingling or attempt to withhold funding from the non-Jewish participants—an unwelcome accounting difficulty.

However, the primary motivation for a partnership from the perspective of the student organizers was the nature of the work itself. They were not opposed

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to Jewish activism in solely Jewish groups, and a number had participated in such experiences previously. However, the situation in New Orleans seemed to them to *require* a broader base. As one student explained,

In a situation like New Orleans where there is tension in the region between races and stark socioeconomic differences, it was really important to go with a diverse group of people. People who need help don't often care who is aiding them, but if you're going there you have to make sure you're the right ambassador for the message that you are conveying. If you go as a diverse group, you are sending a better message . . . about being open to other people, whether it is interfaith or interracial or whatever (A. Roth, personal communication, September 8, 2011).

In other words, Jewish students—across the spectrum of religious observance—felt that a solely Jewish group would undermine the universalistic principles and the modeling behavior that they wanted to communicate. We note that these Jewish students' conviction that it was better to do service alongside non-Jews differs from the findings on Jewish service-learning participants in a major study whose research base was predominantly Jewish students from the Northeast (Rehnberg, Lee, Veron, & Zeligson, 2008, pp. 30, 33, 82). Indeed, the above-quoted student believed that the students' lack of anxiety about having a mixed group was a result of their Southern California cultural background. Both the students and the staff believed that even Jewish text study could be enlivened by the presence and participation of non-Jewish students.

A secondary reason for a partnership was the logistical demands of the trip. First, opening participation to potentially all CSUN students would make it easier to recruit the optimal group, which in their calculations would be 24 high-caliber students. Second, having a larger group would help cover the costs. Approximately \$1,000 was needed per student to cover airline tickets, food, housing, and transportation within New Orleans for six days. A trip that included multiple student groups would bring in aid from cosponsoring clubs and from the CSUN Associated Students Organization, lowering the individual cost per student to \$200. Even this amount was a hardship to some participants, so university funds were indispensable.

TYPES OF CAMPUS PARTNERSHIPS

It is important to clarify the legal and operational differences between two types of campus partnerships. The first type of partnership is with another campus student group that, like Hillel, is an autonomous entity internally governed by its own rules. At CSUN, to operate on campus, all student groups must be registered, which entails agreeing to abide by basic rules of the university and student behavioral codes, and each must be assigned a faculty advisor. During the first three years of the ASB service-learning program, Hillel opened up admission to all students on campus and, for the first two years, partnered with a student club. Staff people were Hillel employees and two "scholars-in-residence" also hired by Hillel.

In this kind of partnership with another student club, it was hard to deal with difficult students. For example, there was a Christian student who proselytized the Jewish participants, and another student who short-changed his work time to drink alcohol on Bourbon Street. Although all student participants were

informed of Hillel's behavioral rules and were selected by interview, these students did not misbehave until they were in New Orleans. The most the Hillel staff could do as a final recourse (other than sending the students home in mid-trip) was to bar them from future Hillel participation or, once back on campus, to persuade the faculty advisor to initiate investigatory and disciplinary procedures.

The second type of campus partnership is with an official university partner that is internally regulated by university rules. With such a partnership, the university feels obligated to involve its staff. Only during the last two years of Hillel's ASB program did Hillel have this type of partnership, and it was a far superior arrangement with regard to student behavior. Students were more conscious of the direct linkage to the university's student disciplinary procedures and knew that violations would appear on their permanent record. Evangelizing students were aware that the university's student code of behavior prohibiting religious harassment trumped their own group's mandate to "witness." For these reasons, the direct link to the university was not only of benefit to the Hillel staff but also provided assurance to Jewish and other students that their fellow participants would comply with the university's student code and focus on the ASB objectives.

Each partnership provided different resources—access to different students, funding, staff/scholars-in-residence for the trip, and course credit. Before initiating each partnership, Hillel had to first assess whether the partner's objectives would be compatible with its own. In the first two years, the trip was open to all students, and the partner was the United Campus Ministry, a Christian organization that "strives to provide every student with an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as well as assist in the growth and development of Christian student leaders" (United Campus Ministry Mission statement, 2011). Shared values—that is, concern for promoting justice and providing aid to the needy—led to this partnership. However, it became clear after two years that it was unwise to continue to partner with this group because, without its staff being present on the trip, there would be insufficient controls on enthusiastic evangelical students. The situation improved in the third year when the trip was opened to all students without any formal connection to another campus group or the university; in this case, general student funds were available, but there was no staff support other than Hillel's contracted hires.

Partnering with the university began in the fourth year, and the improvement was obvious immediately. That year, CSUN's Division of Student Affairs provided two partners whose goals meshed quite well with Hillel's. The Division's community service coordinator provided recruitment, financial, and staff support. Additionally, in years four and five a multiculturally themed residential unit in the university's Residential Housing Association joined in. Students in that cohort, with assistance and encouragement from university staff, follow a curriculum that connects them to the campus and surrounding community, and its staff helped recruit, provided funds, and sent a supervisor along with the group. During the fifth year, these partners were joined by academic units. The Sociology Department publicized the trip to its students and sent a professor to observe the work and coordinate on-site documentation of the experience. Most important was the role of the Religious Studies Department. Faculty member

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Jody Myers had been consulted about the New Orleans project from its inception, and her plans to develop a for-credit service-learning course that incorporated the New Orleans ASB came to fruition for the fifth year. Through this course, the Religious Studies Department sent a faculty member and nine students to the trip. This was the optimal arrangement, as we show.

RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER, ENGAGEMENT, AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Because the service-learning was scheduled during CSUN's week-long spring breaks, which are typically scheduled to include Easter and thus often overlap with Pesach, holiday celebrations were always part of the program. The requirement of the public university to respect the separation of church and state was not violated by this curriculum. Whatever partnership was in place, the policy toward religious holidays was that people could celebrate their own holiday if they wished, and if possible, students from other religious backgrounds could observe, participate, and learn. From the perspective of the Religious Studies Department, the partnership enabled participant observation research. All of the formal worship experiences were presented to the entire group as learning opportunities and were framed by discussion sessions that connected themes and symbols from the services to the Hurricane Katrina dilemmas. The holiday observances added depth to the learning. When the trip included Easter Sunday, a large part of the group attended Easter Mass together. The more knowledgeable Jewish students recognized references to the paschal lamb in the English prayers and were startled that it referred to Jesus. Although Jewish students with weaker religious education did not realize the parallels to Jewish worship, they, too, were fascinated by the rites and had the opportunity to gain knowledge. Students who in other circumstances would not have attended worship services reported doing so because of the learning and discussion format.

Pesach observances were also constructed as an opportunity for multicultural learning and cross-cultural understanding, while allowing Jewish students who regarded the holiday as a religious experience to have their needs met. Pesach seders were held during three of the ASB trips. (When the seders coincided with the ASB trip, some Jewish students who would have otherwise attended the trip did not do so, preferring to remain at home with their families.) The first time, all students attended a community seder at a local synagogue, but the other two seders were organized by the students and staff to better fit the group needs and trip themes. The second time the seder was designed by the rabbinical student (Reform) and Episcopal ministry student who served as scholars-in-residence; they put together a learning seder that explored the themes of Passover and the parallels in Christianity. Like a traditional seder, the students around the table took turns reading the homemade Haggadah, which was full of stories, explanations, traditional Pesach blessings, and activities that engaged them fully in the seder.

The third seder was designed by a Jewish student and the Hillel director. This Haggadah contained Hebrew, English, Hebrew transliterations, and explanations. In the seder itself, Jewish students shared their families' seder traditions, and the structure allowed all students to ask questions throughout. The conversations it spurred were lively, deep, and meaningful. This particular seder brought to light the critical role played by one's background and peoplehood story in

one's perceptions. An African American student who was the NAACP campus chapter president asked one of the Jewish students, "You mean you don't think it was black African slaves who built the pyramids?" Jewish students had never contemplated that possibility. For all students, it was a profound opportunity to consider their understanding of the Exodus narrative and how it shaped their worldviews and to explore what their interpretations were based on.

The fact that one of the partners was a secular, public university shaped the religious elements in a particular way. Participants not only dealt with each others' religions but they also were faced with a variety of secular outlooks toward religion. Students were asked to differentiate among subjective beliefs, a range of traditional doctrines and practices, and academic perspectives. This multifaceted approach is not generally the mode of formalized interfaith dialogue or the stuff of everyday conversation about religion, but it is what normally occurs in any Religious Studies academic course. When the Religious Studies professor was on the staff, all the students were exposed to this way of thinking, and many sought to emulate it in formal and informal conversations in the Pesach seders, in the learning and reflection sessions, and on the work site. It was a novel experience to hear the gently worded question about the slaves in Egypt ("You mean you don't think it was black African slaves who built the pyramids?") rather than "How can you say it was the Jewish slaves who built the pyramids? It was African slaves!" The query was simply curious, without anger or judgment, leading to a comparison of viewpoints and furthering the conversation.

The mixed cohort of students provided unexpected benefits for the enhancement of Jewish learning. Jewish students had both a greater opportunity and need to define their Jewish identity in the presence of non-Jewish participants. Jewish students typically discuss Judaism or their own religious commitment in terms of their practices, but the partnerships connected them with students who typically connect religion with belief. Hillel students needed to articulate their beliefs to others and/or confront their confusion about their own faith and theology. For example, the Jewish student who constructed the Haggadah was careful to omit any reference to "the Chosen People," thinking that it might be offensive, but a non-Jewish student asked about it anyway. Facing her own discomfort sensitized her and other participants to the complexity of their own identities (Martin, 2007, p. 32).

In addition, more pride in Jewish teachings was generated than would otherwise occur in a solely Jewish group. The partnership did not reduce the amount of Jewish texts that were studied as part of the trip orientation sessions and while the group was in New Orleans. Assigned texts generally included passages from the *Tanakh* (Isaiah 58:6–12; Deuteronomy 24:20–22; Leviticus 19:16), Talmud (BT Baba Batra 1), Maimonides (the ladder of *tzedakah*), and Hasidic tales. In an entirely Jewish setting, these teachings may not arouse much interest or may be taken for granted. In a mixed group, however, Jewish students want "their" traditions to receive the respect of outsiders. They sit up and take notice when non-Jews find Jewish laws interesting or show competence interpreting them (Rehnberg et al., 2008, p. 82). In addition, the fact that a Jewish organization had initiated and organized the service trip made Jewish participants feel good about themselves as Jews.

Despite all the advance preparations, the minister at the church that housed the mixed-faith group one year insisted that the entire group attend the daily

worship service. After group leaders' repeated explanations and refusals to require all students to attend, the minister threatened to expel the group from the church one day before the trip's end. The students' reactions varied greatly. Some of the Jewish students were upset, some just wanted to ignore the issue, and others felt that the group should have gone to the service just to appease the minister. Some of the Christian students were embarrassed and assured the Jewish students that this minister did not represent the "good Christians" of the world. Others wanted to go talk to the minister and try to explain to him that the group was made up of students of diverse backgrounds who were not all Christian. Still others thought the group should just leave and find another place to stay for the last night in New Orleans. Had the group been all Jewish students, they would not have been confronted by the diversity of opinions among Christians. Their attitude toward devout Christians and their belief in *tikkun olam* as a universal value may have been undermined had the Christian students' embarrassment and apologies not mitigated the pain of the encounter.

BENEFITS OF AN ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

The ASB trip that included the partnership with the Religious Studies (RS) Department's service-learning course was the most powerful and effective one, for several reasons. In addition to the communication skills fostered by the Religious Studies approach described earlier, the group as a whole gained from the academic work of the nine enrolled RS students. The RS students prepared for the trip by reading an assigned book on the region's social justice problems from the perspectives of communication, criminology, history, ethnic studies, and sociology. Each day, the RS students reported on their reading to the entire group. One presentation, for example, described the social conditions of the vulnerable population, the history of flooding in the Mississippi, and government management of the Delta region against the backdrop of racial and class divisions. Everyone was in attendance. The presentations gave the students the vocabulary and tools to help them grapple with the enormity of the problems they saw before their eyes that were not present in the Jewish texts. They provided an academic basis and framework for the discussion that was moderated by the presenter and professor, and the Jewish content was layered on top by students and Hillel staff.

Furthermore, the academic partnership formalized and elevated the learning on the ASB trip. The Religious Studies course was developed by faculty familiar with service-learning pedagogy and had to meet the university's high standards for such courses (Myers & Hatkoff, 2002). Collaborating with the university service-learning course increased the importance of learning for all trip participants. Students paid attention to their peers who were presenting, sensitive to the fact that the RS students would be graded on their performance during the trip and on returning to campus would need to synthesize their reading and experience in a paper. In none of the other ASB trips did students make presentations or lead discussions on history and ethics. The RS students served, in these respects, as models to the other students. Although Hillel, nationally, has stood out for its Alternative Break trips and its recognition that reflection and follow-through are essential, the requirements for service-learning courses in the CSUN university curriculum provide far greater structure, demands, and discipline.

Students' assessments and the director's post-trip contacts with Jewish participants demonstrated that they valued this academic aspect of the ASB. The following words of an alumna are indicative:

When I was a senior I decided to go on the trip to New Orleans because I wanted to be able to do community service and make new Jewish friends from Hillel. It seemed like the perfect opportunity. Once we started meeting I realized the trip was actually a mixture of Jewish students and students from the Religious Studies Department who were mostly not Jewish. Going to New Orleans with this eclectic group of students really opened my eyes to so many different cultures in a way I have never been introduced to before. I really bonded on the first night of Pesach when I was sitting next to one Mexican student and one Egyptian student and was explaining Passover as we sat in the Annunciation Mission having a seder. Not only did I teach them about Judaism, but one of the most influential conversations I had was that night after the seder when I was sitting with two Jews and two African American students and we were talking about how different our cultures were but how similar our history is (E. Feinman, personal communication, September 23, 2011).

Partnering with academic departments that implement service-learning pedagogy thus added significantly to an already strong Hillel program.

Finally, college-age Jewish service-learning partnerships across community lines are a logical preparation for post-college life. Students learn how to speak to others about religion and how to share each others' religious experiences without violating their own convictions; indeed, these activities affirm the legitimacy and desirability of religious engagement. Jewish civic engagement and activism to "repair the world" invariably occur in cooperation with churches and mosques, government agencies, NGOs, and others outside of the Jewish community (Milens, 2007). Service-learning partnerships such as these allow Hillel and the public university to foster civic-minded adults who know how to work collaboratively to better society—an essential objective of both their missions.

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